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Research Article

Exploring EFL Students' Academic Reading Experiences: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Linguistic, Cognitive, Strategic, and Pedagogical Factors

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Abstract. Reading English academic texts remains challenging for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students because comprehension involves interconnected linguistic and cognitive processes. This study explores students' reported difficulties in comprehending English academic texts, their strategic responses, and the learning support they perceive as necessary. Employing a qualitative interpretivist design, data were collected from 24 undergraduate students across five study programs at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Siliwangi Bandung using an online questionnaire comprising 19 closed-ended descriptive items and three open-ended qualitative prompts. Open-ended responses served as the primary dataset and were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), supported contextually by closed-ended descriptive data. The analysis generated four interconnected themes: linguistic barriers, cognitive demands, strategic adaptation, and sustained learning support. Findings demonstrate that unfamiliar vocabulary, specialized academic registers, and complex syntactic structures rapidly escalate into macro-level comprehension bottlenecks,

prompting students to deploy rereading, skimming, scanning, dictionary verification, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) scaffolding. Moreover, students emphasized that durable academic literacy requires deliberate practice, accessible resources, and explicit lecturer guidance. This study proposes an integrative conceptual model highlighting the necessity of synchronizing language development, strategic agency, and responsive pedagogical scaffolding in EFL higher education.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Academic Reading, EFL, Higher Education, Reading Strategies, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read academic texts in English is a foundational competency in higher education because it enables students to access, evaluate, and synthesize global scientific literature. Mastery of academic reading not only supports students in completing discipline-specific coursework and final theses, but also fosters critical thinking, scholarly information literacy, and lifelong intellectual engagement. Across higher education disciplines, academic reading allows learners to construct domain knowledge through active interaction with empirical journal articles, theoretical monographs, and scholarly publications (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Unlike reading for general or recreational purposes, academic reading demands complex cognitive processing in which readers must move beyond surface-level word recognition to identify central claims, interpret inter-sentential relationships, evaluate argumentative reasoning, and integrate implicit propositions into a coherent mental representation of the text (Kintsch, 1988; Vettori et al., 2024).

Despite its paramount importance, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students experience persistent difficulties when engaging with English academic texts. Current studies in EFL higher education indicate that limited general vocabulary, unfamiliar specialized academic registers, complex syntactic structures, and weak inferencing abilities represent primary linguistic barriers that impede text comprehension (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Brooks et al., 2021; Nation, 2022). In the Indonesian university context, recent investigations reveal that both non-English major undergraduates and English department students struggle substantially with dense disciplinary terminology, nominalizations, and unfamiliar rhetorical conventions in international journal articles (Dardjito et al., 2023; Kelderak, 2023; Panggabean et al., 2026). Beyond word-level decoding, learners encounter severe higher-order cognitive obstacles, including difficulties in distinguishing thesis statements, evaluating an author's argumentation, and synthesizing information across multiple sections (Maab et al., 2024; Sweller et al., 2019). These patterns confirm that academic reading difficulties in EFL contexts stem from an intricate interaction between lower-level linguistic constraints and higher-level cognitive processing bottlenecks (Vettori et al., 2024).

Within Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions, this challenge is compounded by a noticeable curricular and regulatory gap between institutional academic expectations and pedagogical provision. Under national higher education competency frameworks and institutional curriculum policies, undergraduate

students across non-English study programs are increasingly required to consult English-language journal articles and international references to fulfill coursework and research requirements. However, institutional curriculum regulations typically position English solely as a general institutional course (*Mata Kuliah Dasar Umum*) with limited credit hours and broad communicative objectives, rather than mandating structured English for Academic Purposes or discipline-specific academic reading scaffolding. Consequently, existing curricular policies lack explicit instructional guidelines for bridging the gap between students' baseline English proficiency and the advanced scholarly reading demands imposed by higher education standards, leaving students to navigate complex scientific texts without systematic pedagogical support (Dardjito et al., 2023; Kelderak, 2023).

To cope with these linguistic and curricular challenges, EFL students actively adopt diverse reading strategies and digital learning tools. Previous research demonstrates that cognitive and metacognitive strategies—such as rereading, skimming, scanning, note-taking, summarizing, and comprehension monitoring—play an essential role in repairing comprehension breakdowns and reducing cognitive overload (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Anggia & Habók, 2024; Dewi et al., 2026; Rusgandi, 2023). Across university contexts, students' metacognitive awareness consistently shapes how effectively they regulate their reading behaviors when confronting dense academic prose (Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026; Suharni et al., 2024; Villanueva, 2022). In addition, contemporary learners increasingly integrate electronic dictionaries, machine translation platforms, and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools—such as ChatGPT—into their reading workflows to scaffold vocabulary retention, top-down main-idea comprehension, and conceptual clarification (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025; Ironsi & Bostanci, 2026; Joo, 2025; Kim, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Furthermore, academic reading development is strongly mediated by external pedagogical conditions, including lecturer scaffolding, structured strategy training, accessible resources, and motivational self-efficacy (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Khurram, 2023; Rose et al., 2021).

Although research on EFL academic reading has expanded considerably, a clear research gap persists in the existing literature. Prior studies have predominantly investigated vocabulary mastery, reading difficulties, metacognitive strategy frequency, or digital tool usage through quantitative surveys and variable-centered statistical modeling (Lalily et al., 2026; Patty et al., 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2025; Rahayu et al., 2025). While these studies successfully identify discrete predictors and frequency distributions, they rarely explain how linguistic barriers, cognitive processing demands, strategic adaptations, and pedagogical support interact dynamically within students' lived academic reading experiences (Vettori et al., 2024). Moreover, qualitative studies examining how non-English major and English major students in Indonesian Islamic higher education subjectively interpret reading obstacles and combine traditional strategies with AI-assisted scaffolding remain scarce. This study fills these gaps by employing Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to capture students' holistic narratives and construct an empirical conceptual model illustrating how linguistic, cognitive, strategic, and pedagogical dimensions operate as an interconnected, adaptive process.

Addressing this problem carries substantial academic and practical urgency. From an academic standpoint, failing to examine the qualitative interconnections among reading factors leaves a theoretical void regarding how lower-level linguistic bottlenecks escalate into macro-level cognitive strain and trigger strategic self-regulation. From a practical standpoint, if higher education institutions and lecturers do not understand how students actually experience and respond to academic texts, instructional interventions will remain fragmented—relying narrowly on isolated vocabulary memorization or decontextualized strategy lists without responsive pedagogical scaffolding. If left unaddressed, this misalignment risks perpetuating superficial reading habits, over-reliance on uncritical machine translation, and continued disengagement of EFL students from global scientific discourse.

Based on the problem formulation and research gaps outlined above, this study addresses three explicit Research Questions (RQs):

1. What linguistic and cognitive difficulties do EFL university students report when reading English academic texts?
2. What strategies do EFL university students report using to address these academic reading difficulties?
3. What forms of learning support do EFL university students perceive as helpful or necessary for developing their academic reading competence?

By answering these three research questions, this study aims to explore EFL university students' academic reading experiences at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Siliwangi Bandung through Reflexive Thematic Analysis and to develop an empirical, data-driven conceptual model explaining how linguistic barriers, cognitive demands, strategic adaptations, and sustained learning support interact in shaping students' academic reading competence.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to explore undergraduate students' lived experiences in reading and comprehending English academic texts. A qualitative approach was deliberately selected because the research objectives focus on understanding how students subjectively interpret reading obstacles, construct adaptive responses, and perceive pedagogical support, rather than testing statistical hypotheses or measuring causal variance among isolated variables. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, academic reading is conceptualized as a contextual, socially situated phenomenon shaped through continuous interaction between individual learners and their academic environment (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kushnir, 2025). Consistent with the epistemological foundations of RTA, the researcher served as the primary analytical instrument throughout data interpretation. Unlike coding-reliability approaches that prioritize inter-rater consensus, RTA treats coding, theme generation, and conceptual integration as reflexive, iterative practices enriched by the researcher's theoretical sensitivity and sustained engagement with participant narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Accordingly, themes were constructed as analytical patterns of shared meaning connecting empirical data with broader conceptual frameworks of EFL academic literacy (Bachtiar et al., 2026).

The research was conducted at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Siliwangi Bandung, a private Islamic higher education institution located in Cimahi City, West Java, Indonesia. In alignment with institutional academic policies and national higher education curriculum standards, English is taught across study programs as a foundational institutional course or academic supporting subject, requiring students to read English-language journal articles, reference books, and scholarly materials to complete coursework. Nevertheless, because English functions strictly as a foreign language in daily communication, comprehending scholarly publications remains a persistent challenge for students. A total of 24 undergraduate students participated in this study, representing five study programs: Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Sharia Economic Law (HES), Sharia Banking, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education (PGMI), and English Language Education. Including participants across five distinct study programs and multiple semester levels was intended to capture rich heterogeneity in academic reading experiences rather than conducting comparative statistical testing across programs. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on the explicit inclusion criterion of having direct experience reading English academic texts in their university courses (Patton, 2015). In accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines, all prospective participants received detailed explanations regarding the research objectives, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality protections before providing online informed consent. To preserve anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed, and participant quotations were reported exclusively using anonymized codes (P01–P24). Consistent with qualitative inquiry principles, the sample of 24 information-rich participants generated recurring, conceptually dense narrative patterns sufficient to support rigorous thematic interpretation (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year through an online qualitative questionnaire administered via Google Forms. An open-ended survey instrument was chosen because it enabled systematic narrative collection across five study programs while allowing participants space to reflect thoughtfully on their academic reading experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Patton, 2015). The instrument consisted of 22 items, comprising 19 closed-ended descriptive items and three open-ended qualitative prompts. The closed-ended items gathered contextual descriptive profiles regarding the frequency of reading difficulties, self-perceived lexical and reading competence, strategy use frequency, utilization of learning resources, and reading motivation. Meanwhile, the three open-ended prompts served as the primary qualitative dataset, directly aligned with the three research questions by exploring: (1) specific difficulties encountered when reading English academic texts, (2) strategies employed to overcome those difficulties, and (3) forms of learning support perceived as essential for improving academic reading skills. Instrument indicators were developed from established EFL academic reading literature and reviewed prior to administration to ensure strict alignment between research objectives, indicators, and item wording (Patton, 2015). Following data collection, all 24 submissions were verified for completeness, exported to a structured spreadsheet, and anonymized (P01–P24), with open-ended narratives analyzed via

RTA and closed-ended responses utilized strictly as descriptive contextual support (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis procedure: (1) familiarization with the dataset through repeated reading of all open-ended responses, (2) generating initial semantic and latent codes, (3) constructing candidate themes, (4) reviewing and refining candidate themes against the coded extracts and entire dataset, (5) defining and naming the final thematic constructs, and (6) producing the integrated analytical narrative (Byrne, 2022; Kushnir, 2025). Through recursive reflection on the dynamic linkages among themes, four core thematic constructs were synthesized into an overarching conceptual model of EFL academic reading experiences (Bachtiar et al., 2026). To ensure methodological rigor, trustworthiness was established following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the narratives, comprehensive coding across all 24 cases, and inclusion of verbatim participant excerpts. Dependability was maintained via a systematic audit trail documenting coding iterations and theme development. Confirmability was upheld through continuous researcher reflexivity throughout theme construction (Braun & Clarke, 2022), while transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the institutional context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 24 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students from Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Siliwangi Bandung selected through purposive sampling across five study programs: Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Sharia Economic Law (HES), Sharia Banking, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education (PGMI), and English Language Education. All participants had direct experience reading English academic texts in their coursework, thereby fulfilling the inclusion criteria. The demographic and institutional characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Description
Number of participants	24 students
Institution	STAI Siliwangi Bandung
Study Programs	PAI, HES, Sharia Banking, PGMI, English Language Education
Sampling technique	Purposive sampling
Inclusion criteria	Direct experience reading academic texts in English

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of the open-ended questionnaire responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022) generated four interconnected themes that trace how students experience and navigate English academic texts: (1) linguistic barriers, (2) cognitive demands, (3) strategic adaptation, and (4) sustained learning support, culminating in

the integrative conceptual model presented in Figure 1. To provide a cohesive analytical synthesis aligned directly with the three Research Questions (RQs) presented in the introduction, the empirical findings and theoretical interpretations are organized into three main subheadings below.

Linguistic Barriers and Cognitive Demands in Academic Reading

The thematic analysis demonstrates that EFL university students' academic reading experiences are initiated by fundamental linguistic constraints that rapidly escalate into higher-order cognitive processing demands. Rather than appearing as isolated language errors, difficulties emerged at the earliest stage of textual engagement, where unfamiliar general vocabulary, specialized academic registers, complex syntactic structures, and phonological discrepancies created substantial decoding bottlenecks (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Brooks et al., 2021). Across all five study programs, limited vocabulary mastery stood out as the most pervasive obstacle reported by participants. As one student explained, *"Sometimes I come across new words that I don't know the meaning of"* (P03). Similar accounts were voiced by other participants who emphasized general vocabulary deficits (P09) and connected unfamiliar lexical items directly to difficulties in understanding grammatical relationships (P11). These empirical narratives indicate that lexical limitations do not merely block the translation of isolated words; rather, they disrupt readers' capacity to link propositions across clauses and build coherent textual meaning from the outset (Nation, 2022). When core content words and academic verbs remain unrecognized in opening paragraphs, students lose semantic momentum and are forced into fragmented, word-by-word deciphering that prevents smooth sentence-level comprehension.

Beyond general everyday vocabulary, participants reported substantial difficulty navigating the specialized academic register—disciplinary terminology and formal scholarly expressions that rarely occur in conversational English (Dardjito et al., 2023; Nation, 2022). One participant observed, *"Academic terms are different from expressions commonly heard in daily life"* (P23), a perception echoed by another student who pointed to the dense scientific language characteristic of academic publications (P20). This distinction underscores that academic reading proficiency depends not only on vocabulary breadth—the sheer number of words known—but also on vocabulary depth, including sensitivity to disciplinary collocations, abstract nominalizations, and context-specific scholarly usage (Nation, 2022). In Indonesian higher education settings, non-English major students in Islamic and social science disciplines face heightened lexical distance because academic articles frequently embed discipline-specific concepts within formal English discourse structures (Dardjito et al., 2023; Kelderak, 2023). Even when students recognize the literal root of a familiar English word, its specialized theoretical or methodological meaning within an academic discipline often remains opaque, preventing learners from connecting technical concepts to the broader scholarly discussion (Dardjito et al., 2023; Nation, 2022).

Structural and grammatical complexity further compounded students' initial linguistic processing load. Participants highlighted difficulties in parsing multi-clause

sentences and distinguishing nuanced verb tenses and grammatical forms, noting that *"the complex sentence structure, the complex vocabulary..."* (P21) and confusion over verb forms (P14) slowed their reading pace and fragmented comprehension. Academic journal prose typically relies on dense syntactic packaging—including embedded relative clauses, passive constructions, participial modifiers, and extended noun phrases—that requires readers to track syntactic dependencies across long spans of text before semantic relationships can be resolved (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Vettori et al., 2024). Interestingly, although academic reading is a silent visual activity, several participants also associated word-recognition hurdles with phonological discrepancies between English orthography and pronunciation. One student remarked, *"Pronouncing written words and spoken words is different"* (P18), while another admitted continuing struggles with English pronunciation (P16). In second language (L2) reading psycholinguistics, subvocal phonological recoding often supports lexical access and working memory retention among developing EFL readers; consequently, irregular English spelling-to-sound correspondences delay word recognition and reduce reading fluency (Vettori et al., 2024). Descriptive responses from the 19 closed-ended items corroborated these qualitative patterns: the majority of participants reported encountering unfamiliar vocabulary "often" or "very often," rated their lexical mastery within the fair-to-poor range, and identified vocabulary limitations as their primary obstacle to comprehending academic texts.

Crucially, the findings reveal that once lower-level linguistic decoding is obstructed, students' difficulties do not remain confined to word recognition; instead, they transform into acute higher-order cognitive demands during meaning construction (Kintsch, 1988; Sweller et al., 2019). After decoding individual lexical units, participants struggled to synthesize information across sentences and paragraphs, identify central thesis statements, trace the author's argumentative progression, and integrate fragmented details into a unified mental model (Maab et al., 2024; Vettori et al., 2024). The difficulty of achieving macro-level text comprehension was succinctly captured by a participant who stated, *"Very little understanding of the text"* (P07). Several participants explained that even when they could recognize or translate individual words literally, they remained unable to synthesize the overarching message intended by the author. This gap between surface lexical decoding and holistic meaning construction highlights that academic comprehension requires active inferential bridging across discourse segments rather than additive word-by-word translation (Kintsch, 1988; Maab et al., 2024). Without grasping rhetorical signposts, hedging expressions, and logical connectors that organize scholarly arguments, students remain trapped at the micro-propositional level of isolated sentences.

Cognitive strain became particularly pronounced when students were required to apply textual information to complete academic tasks, such as *"Difficulty when answering questions"* (P04) and *"Finding the main point"* (P24). Closed-ended survey items reinforced this thematic pattern, showing that most participants frequently experienced difficulty identifying the primary purpose of academic readings, grasping inter-paragraph transitions, and following extended scholarly arguments. Academic assignments require learners not merely to recall isolated facts, but to distinguish

main claims from supporting evidence, evaluate methodological reasoning, and synthesize perspectives across sections—tasks that demand sustained executive attention and discourse-level inference (Maab et al., 2024; Patty et al., 2025). Simultaneously, initial signs of metacognitive awareness emerged when participants recognized gaps in their comprehension and paused to re-evaluate confusing passages—indicating that meaning construction unfolds dynamically through ongoing cognitive monitoring rather than passive linear decoding (Sweller et al., 2019; Vettori et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the progression from linguistic barriers to cognitive demands observed in this study aligns closely with Kintsch's (1988) Construction–Integration Model and Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller et al., 2019). According to Kintsch's (1988) Construction–Integration Model, reading comprehension requires learners to convert surface-level linguistic inputs into a structured textbase and subsequently integrate those propositions with prior background knowledge to form a coherent mental situation model. In the present study, participants' inability to move from word-level translation (P03, P07) to macro-level synthesis (P04, P24) demonstrates a breakdown at the integration stage, where disconnected lexical propositions fail to coalesce into a coherent representation of the author's argument. Cognitive Load Theory explains the underlying mechanism of this breakdown: because human working memory possesses strictly limited capacity, allocating excessive attentional resources to lower-level lexical decoding, syntactic parsing, and phonological recoding depletes the cognitive capacity needed for higher-order inferencing, main-idea extraction, and critical evaluation (Sweller et al., 2019).

These interpretations further resonate with Vettori et al.'s (2024) systematic review, which establishes that L2 expository reading comprehension relies on the coordinated functioning of foundational language skills (vocabulary and grammar) alongside higher-order cognitive skills (inferencing, comprehension monitoring, and knowledge integration). Similarly, recent Indonesian empirical studies confirm that both non-English major students (Dardjito et al., 2023; Patty et al., 2025) and English education undergraduates (Panggabean et al., 2026; Rahayu et al., 2025) experience cascading difficulties when dense academic terminology overloads their working memory during journal reading. However, whereas quantitative studies typically model vocabulary knowledge, syntactic parsing, and critical thinking as separate statistical predictors (Kelderak, 2023; Lalily et al., 2026), the Reflexive Thematic Analysis in this study demonstrates that linguistic barriers and cognitive demands operate as an integrated, cumulative continuum within students' lived experiences. Directly answering the first research question, EFL students encounter interconnected lexical, register, syntactic, and phonological obstacles that rapidly escalate into macro-level comprehension and synthesis bottlenecks. Within the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1), linguistic barriers represent the critical entry point that directly amplifies cognitive demands, establishing that isolated vocabulary instruction alone is insufficient unless paired with scaffolding for macro-level text integration (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Maab et al., 2024).

Moreover, comparing these thematic patterns across the five study programs—Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Sharia Economic Law (HES), Sharia Banking,

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education (PGMI), and English Language Education—demonstrates that while the intensity of lexical unfamiliarity varied slightly with prior English exposure, the underlying cognitive escalation remained remarkably consistent (Dardjito et al., 2023; Panggabean et al., 2026). Even students enrolled in English Language Education reported encountering conceptual bottlenecks when shifting from general language textbooks to empirical journal articles containing specialized theoretical frameworks and dense methodological prose (Panggabean et al., 2026; Rahayu et al., 2025). This convergence across diverse academic majors confirms that academic reading difficulty is not merely a remedial English proficiency problem confined to non-English departments, but a broader academic literacy challenge rooted in the structural and rhetorical complexity of scholarly genres (Kintsch, 1988; Vettori et al., 2024).

Strategic Adaptation in Overcoming Reading Difficulties

In response to the intertwined linguistic barriers and cognitive demands outlined above, participants did not remain passive recipients of difficult texts; instead, they exercised active learner agency by deploying a multifaceted repertoire of reading strategies as self-regulated adaptive mechanisms (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Villanueva, 2022). Rather than serving merely as mechanical procedures to finish coursework, strategy adoption functioned as an intentional regulatory response aimed at repairing comprehension breakdowns, verifying lexical meaning, and mitigating working memory overload during complex academic reading tasks (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Rusgandi, 2023). Across all five study programs, students demonstrated metacognitive responsiveness by adjusting their reading actions whenever surface-level decoding stalled or macro-level coherence broke down, transforming static text consumption into an active problem-solving process (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026).

Rereading emerged as the most pervasive cognitive monitoring strategy across participants. When encountering dense academic prose or ambiguous arguments, students deliberately returned to challenging segments multiple times to verify meaning and reconstruct contextual coherence. Participants reported practices such as *"Rereading the text"* (P18), *"Re-reading"* (P19), and *"I reread, took important points, and used a translator if I still encountered difficulties"* (P11). Far from being unreflective repetition, rereading functioned as an active metacognitive monitoring tool through which learners detected comprehension failures, re-parsed complex syntax, and consolidated fragmented propositions into clearer understanding (Dewi et al., 2026; Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026). From a cognitive processing standpoint, recursive reading allows L2 learners to distribute attentional effort across multiple passes: during the initial pass, working memory is heavily occupied by unfamiliar vocabulary and clause boundaries, whereas subsequent passes build on established lexical familiarity to free cognitive capacity for tracking logical connectors and authorial reasoning (Sweller et al., 2019; Villanueva, 2022). This sequential reallocation of cognitive resources explains why students across both English and non-English programs relied instinctively on repeated reading to stabilize comprehension before attempting higher-order synthesis (Dewi et al., 2026; Rusgandi, 2023).

Alongside traditional cognitive strategies, participants extensively integrated digital technologies, electronic dictionaries, machine translation platforms, and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into their academic reading routines. Students reported combining conventional reference tools such as *"Dictionary"* (P06) with modern digital assistants including *"Translate and ChatGPT or AI"* (P09). Crucially, the qualitative narratives indicate that participants utilized digital translation and generative AI primarily as supplementary cognitive scaffolds—to resolve immediate lexical ambiguities, unpack dense theoretical terminology, and obtain simplified explanations of difficult passages—rather than as complete substitutes for active reading engagement (Ironsi & Bostanci, 2026; Joo, 2025). By using AI and translation platforms selectively when comprehension stalled (P09, P11), students maintained active cognitive ownership over the reading process while lowering extraneous linguistic load (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025; Kim, 2024). Rather than blindly copying machine-generated outputs, learners used targeted digital queries to clarify specific conceptual bottlenecks and then returned to the English source text to verify coherence within the surrounding paragraph (Ironsi & Bostanci, 2026; Joo, 2025).

Furthermore, participants deployed structural text-processing and information-management strategies, including skimming, scanning, extracting key terms, note-taking, and summarizing (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Suharni et al., 2024). One participant described a sequential global-to-detail workflow: *"I read all the texts first, then summarize the important information"* (P03), whereas others highlighted using *"skimming and scanning"* (P24) or combining repeated reading with structured note-taking (P15, P21). By condensing lengthy academic sections into concise written notes and summaries, students externalized complex textual propositions onto paper or digital documents, effectively offloading working memory demands and clarifying macro-structural relationships among ideas (Sweller et al., 2019; Suharni et al., 2024). In addition, several learners practiced targeted vocabulary verification before or during deep reading, explaining that they *"Find the key words from the text, then understand some of the words in it"* (P03) or *"Check the unfamiliar vocabulary and read it several times"* (P21). Rather than halting comprehension for every unfamiliar function word, prioritizing high-value disciplinary keywords enabled students to identify conceptual anchors governing each paragraph and sustain overall reading fluency (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Nation, 2022). Closed-ended survey items confirmed that strategic adaptation was widely practiced across all five study programs, with high reported frequencies for rereading, dictionary consultation, and structural scanning.

These findings align closely with contemporary EFL reading strategy and metacognitive awareness scholarship. Research utilizing metacognitive reading strategy frameworks consistently demonstrates that university students rely heavily on problem-solving strategies (such as rereading, adjusting reading speed, and guessing from context) and global reading strategies (such as skimming for main ideas and summarizing) to navigate academic texts (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Dewi et al., 2026; Villanueva, 2022). Studies across Indonesian higher education institutions similarly report that students combine bottom-up lexical verification with top-down

structural scanning to manage dense journal articles (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Puspitasari et al., 2025; Rahayu et al., 2025; Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026; Suharni et al., 2024). As Rusgandi (2023) notes, explicit reading strategies remain indispensable for enhancing EFL comprehension even as learning environments evolve technologically. Moreover, the current findings demonstrate that students do not apply strategies in rigid isolation; instead, they orchestrate dynamic, iterative strategy clusters—moving flexibly from initial skimming to targeted keyword lookup, rereading, AI-assisted conceptual clarification, and written summarization depending on the linguistic and conceptual density of each text segment (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026).

At the same time, the prominent role of ChatGPT and digital translation tools in participants' accounts (P09, P11, P22) reflects an important contemporary shift in EFL strategic behavior. Recent empirical investigations demonstrate that generative AI tools can serve as effective cognitive scaffolds in L2 reading when used to clarify academic vocabulary, support top-down main-idea comprehension, and reduce pre-reading anxiety (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025; Ironsi & Bostanci, 2026; Kim, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Specifically, Kim (2024) shows that ChatGPT-assisted scaffolding supports top-down main-idea extraction among EFL college readers, while Abdelhalim and Alsehibany (2025) demonstrate that structured ChatGPT consultation strengthens academic vocabulary retention and contextual word mastery. Similarly, Ironsi and Bostanci (2026) highlight that generative AI-supported reading environments enhance learner autonomy by offering immediate conceptual clarification while preserving reader engagement with the original academic source. Consistent with Joo's (2025) findings on human–AI collaborative academic reading, students in the present study integrated AI selectively into multi-step reading routines alongside rereading and note-taking. However, from an interpretivist standpoint, these reported practices are analyzed strictly as student-reported adaptive behaviors rather than objective measurements of reading gain, recognizing that unguided AI reliance could risk superficial processing or uncritical acceptance of inaccurate summaries if students lack metacognitive evaluation skills (Joo, 2025). Directly answering the second research question, EFL students address academic reading difficulties through a self-regulated combination of metacognitive monitoring (rereading), structural text management (skimming, scanning, keyword extraction, and summarizing), and selective digital and AI-assisted scaffolding. Within the conceptual model (Figure 1), strategic adaptation functions as the active behavioral bridge through which EFL learners attempt to regulate cognitive load and sustain engagement despite persistent linguistic and cognitive hurdles (Anggia & Habók, 2024; Rusgandi, 2023).

Finally, the interplay between traditional metacognitive strategies and digital tools reveals an important pedagogical nuance regarding strategic efficiency across study programs. While students across PAI, HES, Sharia Banking, PGMI, and English Language Education consistently reported using rereading, skimming, scanning, and dictionary lookup, their narratives suggest that strategic effort was frequently reactive—triggered only after comprehension had already broken down—rather than proactively structured before reading began (Almauizzah & Hapsari, 2026; Anggia &

Habók, 2024). Furthermore, students rarely mentioned planning reading goals in advance or evaluating rhetorical move structures across journal sections, indicating that their strategic repertoire centered predominantly on local comprehension repair rather than systematic discourse analysis (Dewi et al., 2026; Sari & Fauziyyah, 2026). When learners rely solely on unguided trial-and-error translation or repeated linear rereading without explicit training in discourse mapping and critical AI prompting, strategy execution can become time-consuming and cognitively exhausting (Joo, 2025; Suharni et al., 2024). Recognizing both the agency and the limits of students' self-initiated strategies underscores why autonomous strategic adaptation must be reinforced through systematic pedagogical guidance and sustained learning support (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Khurram, 2023).

Sustained Learning Support for Academic Reading Development

The final thematic dimension demonstrates that individual strategic adaptation alone is insufficient to cultivate durable academic reading competence without sustained external learning support and an enabling pedagogical environment. While participants actively deployed rereading, scanning, and digital scaffolds during immediate reading tasks, they emphasized that long-term academic literacy development depends on continuous deliberate practice, accessible learning resources, structured lecturer guidance, and institutional encouragement (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Khurram, 2023). This finding aligns strongly with social cognitive and instructional scaffolding perspectives in L2 literacy, which emphasize that self-regulated learning efforts must be reinforced by enabling contextual conditions, constructive feedback, and structured practice opportunities to translate into mature academic competence (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2023). Without supportive instructional design and recurrent reading exposure, self-initiated coping strategies risk remaining reactive survival tactics for completing isolated assignments rather than evolving into internalized scholarly reading proficiency across university coursework.

A clear consensus emerged among participants regarding the necessity of regular, deliberate practice to expand lexical knowledge and strengthen reading fluency. Students stressed that overcoming academic reading difficulties requires sustained personal effort, noting, *"Increase or expand vocabulary knowledge"* (P11) and *"You need a lot of practice"* (P16). Other participants linked consistent reading practice directly to intrinsic motivation (P04) and peer discussion (P21), reflecting the conviction that academic reading proficiency is an improvable competency developed through persistent effort rather than a fixed trait. In L2 higher education research, this belief reflects strong academic reading self-efficacy, which Rose et al. (2021) identify as a decisive psychological driver of student persistence and academic success when engaging with English scholarly content. When learners attribute reading improvement to sustained effort and strategic practice rather than innate linguistic talent, they demonstrate greater resilience when confronting unfamiliar academic genres (Rose et al., 2021). Furthermore, collaborative peer discussion (P21) provides a socially mediated learning space in which students co-construct meaning, compare

interpretations of difficult passages, negotiate disciplinary terminology, and normalize academic reading challenges across study programs (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

To supplement formal coursework, participants constructed informal, self-directed learning ecosystems beyond the classroom. They reported engaging with English audiovisual media such as *"Watching videos or movies and listening to English music"* (P10), practicing extensive reading through *"Reading English novels with the help of AI"* (P22), and enrolling in supplementary non-formal language programs such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation courses (P06). These self-initiated practices illustrate that contemporary EFL academic reading development operates across an interconnected ecology spanning formal classroom instruction, informal multimodal exposure, and digitally mediated self-study (Ironsi & Bostanci, 2026; Rose et al., 2021). Engaging with extended narratives using AI assistance (P22) enables learners to build reading stamina, syntactic familiarity, and incidental vocabulary recognition in lower-stakes contexts, while structured language courses (P06) provide systematic grammatical and lexical reinforcement that transfers back into academic text comprehension. Similarly, regular exposure to English audiovisual media (P10) strengthens phonological awareness and lexical automaticity, indirectly mitigating the orthographic–phonological decoding hurdles identified in the first theme (Vettori et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, university lecturers remained the central pivot of pedagogical support in participants' narratives. Students articulated explicit expectations for responsive instructional scaffolding, including step-by-step explanations of complex academic texts delivered at an accessible pace (P12), transparent alignment between assigned reading materials and course assessments (P14), and the selection of discipline-relevant reading materials matched to students' academic interests and proficiency levels (P23). These student-articulated needs resonate directly with Grabe and Stoller's (2019) principles of effective academic reading curriculum design, which emphasize coherent text selection, explicit discourse-structure modeling, and constructive alignment between instructional scaffolding and assessment tasks. When lecturers assign complex English journal articles without pre-reading orientation, lexical glossaries, or clear evaluation criteria, students experience heightened cognitive overload and resort to surface-level translation; conversely, when readings connect meaningfully to students' disciplinary inquiries in Islamic education, Sharia economics, or teacher education, intrinsic engagement and conceptual retention increase substantially (Dardjito et al., 2023; Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

Furthermore, recent empirical investigations confirm that structured scaffolding-based instruction and explicit metacognitive strategy training significantly enhance EFL university students' reading comprehension, learner autonomy, and intrinsic motivation while reducing reading anxiety (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Khurram, 2023; Lin et al., 2025). Specifically, Ibrahim et al. (2023) demonstrated that combining collaborative peer learning with lecturer scaffolding and self-assessment yields substantial gains in EFL reading comprehension and self-regulation. Similarly, Khurram (2023) found that explicit metacognitive strategy instruction strengthens university students' strategic awareness and purposeful

strategy deployment across academic reading tasks, while Lin et al. (2025) highlighted how structured pre-reading scaffolding prepares learners to navigate complex English texts with greater confidence and lower cognitive strain. Together, these studies confirm that pedagogical scaffolding acts as an essential bridge between students' strategic intentions and effective academic comprehension, enabling learners to gradually internalize analytical reading routines rather than relying indefinitely on external translation aids (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Khurram, 2023).

Descriptive data from the closed-ended survey items corroborated these qualitative insights: the overwhelming majority of participants reported maintaining high motivation to improve their academic reading skills despite recurring linguistic obstacles, whereas only a small minority identified low motivation as a primary barrier. This convergence between open-ended narratives and closed-ended trends confirms that students possess strong motivational readiness, which requires structured pedagogical scaffolding and continuous practice opportunities to translate into mature academic reading competence. In the context of Indonesian Islamic higher education—where English is frequently restricted to general introductory courses with limited instructional hours—bridging this curricular gap requires lecturers to embed targeted academic reading support directly into disciplinary coursework rather than assuming students will acquire scholarly literacy automatically (Dardjito et al., 2023; Kelderak, 2023).

Taken together, the four themes derived from Reflexive Thematic Analysis were synthesized into an integrative conceptual model representing the student process in developing competence in reading English academic texts, as presented in Figure 1 (Bachtiar et al., 2026; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Directly answering the third research question, students perceive sustained academic reading development as requiring a combination of deliberate independent practice, multimodal and peer-supported resources, and structured lecturer scaffolding. Within this overarching conceptual model (Figure 1), sustained learning support functions as the foundational contextual catalyst that transforms EFL academic reading from a linear struggle into an adaptive, cyclical developmental process. As visualized in Figure 1, linguistic barriers initiate heightened cognitive demands during meaning construction, which in turn prompt students to enact metacognitive and digitally scaffolded strategic adaptations; when reinforced by deliberate practice, accessible resources, peer collaboration, and responsive lecturer scaffolding, these adaptive cycles gradually strengthen reading efficiency and reduce linguistic barriers in subsequent encounters with complex academic texts (Bachtiar et al., 2026; Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

Importantly, the findings across all three research questions illuminate why sustained learning support must operate simultaneously at the individual, peer, and institutional levels to produce lasting academic literacy gains (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2023). When lecturers provide structured pre-reading scaffolding—such as guided previews of disciplinary terminology, structural walkthroughs of empirical research articles, and clear reading prompts aligned with course assessments—students' working memory load during initial text decoding is substantially reduced (Lin et al., 2025; Sweller et al., 2019). Reduced cognitive strain in turn enables learners to deploy metacognitive strategies and generative AI scaffolds

more purposefully rather than resorting to passive, word-for-word translation (Abdelhalim & Alsehibany, 2025; Khurram, 2023). Moreover, institutionalizing peer reading circles and accessible bilingual glossaries across Islamic and education study programs creates recurring opportunities for collaborative meaning negotiation (Dardjito et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2023). Thus, responsive pedagogical scaffolding does not replace student agency; rather, it amplifies learners' self-efficacy and transforms isolated coping tactics into sustainable scholarly reading competence across higher education disciplines (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Rose et al., 2021).

Cyclical Competence Development: Strengthens Reading Efficiency & Reduces

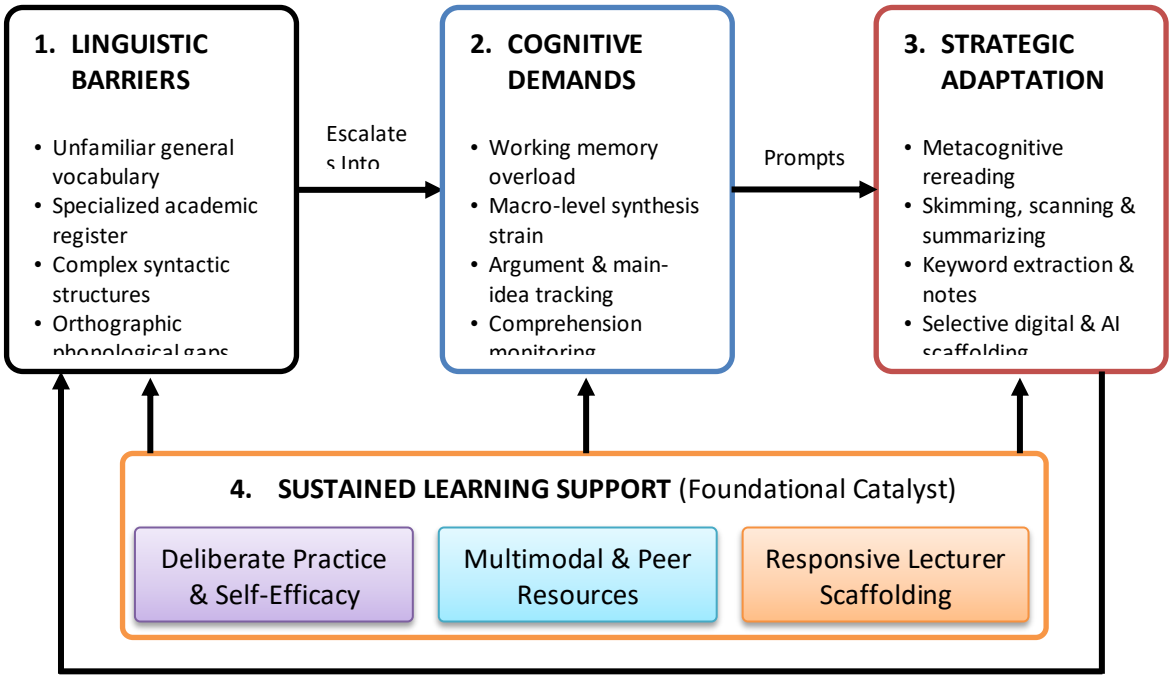

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Student Process in Developing Competence in Reading English Academic Texts *(Developed from Reflexive Thematic Analysis of 24 participants' experiences following Braun & Clarke, 2021)*.

CONCLUSION

This study explored EFL university students' academic reading experiences at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Siliwangi Bandung using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Directly addressing the three research questions, the findings demonstrate that: (1) students' academic reading difficulties begin with lower-level linguistic barriers—specifically limited general vocabulary, unfamiliar academic registers, syntactic complexity, and orthographic–phonological discrepancies—which rapidly overload working memory and escalate into higher-order cognitive demands in main-idea extraction, inferencing, and macro-level meaning integration (RQ1); (2) in response to these intertwined challenges, students exercise active self-regulated agency by combining traditional cognitive and metacognitive strategies (rereading,

skimming, scanning, note-taking, summarizing, and vocabulary verification) with digital translation tools and generative AI platforms as supplementary cognitive scaffolds (RQ2); and (3) sustaining and transforming these individual adaptive strategies into durable academic literacy requires continuous deliberate practice, informal multimodal English exposure, peer collaboration, and explicit pedagogical scaffolding from university lecturers (RQ3).

Theoretically, this study contributes an empirical, interpretivist conceptual model that conceptualizes EFL academic reading as a dynamic, cyclical interaction among linguistic, cognitive, strategic, and pedagogical factors rather than a collection of isolated variables. Practically, the findings indicate that higher education institutions should move beyond fragmented vocabulary drills or standalone strategy checklists toward an integrated academic literacy framework that synchronizes language development, metacognitive strategy instruction, responsible AI integration, and curriculum-aligned pedagogical support.

To translate these findings into institutional policy and educational practice, several actionable recommendations are proposed. First, regarding curricular and institutional policy development, higher education leaders and study program boards—particularly within Islamic and non-English major faculties—should revise general English course syllabi to embed explicit English for Academic Purposes and discipline-specific academic reading modules, ensuring clear alignment between assigned English journal readings, instructional scaffolding, and course assessments. Second, regarding pedagogical practice, lecturers should implement incremental pre-reading and while-reading scaffolding—such as unpacking disciplinary registers, modeling structural text mapping, and providing guided training on ethical, critical use of generative AI tools as comprehension aids rather than passive translation substitutes. Third, regarding future research, because this study was conducted at a single private Islamic higher education institution using open-ended questionnaire narratives from 24 participants, subsequent studies should employ longitudinal designs, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations across multiple public and private universities to further validate and refine the proposed conceptual model.

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